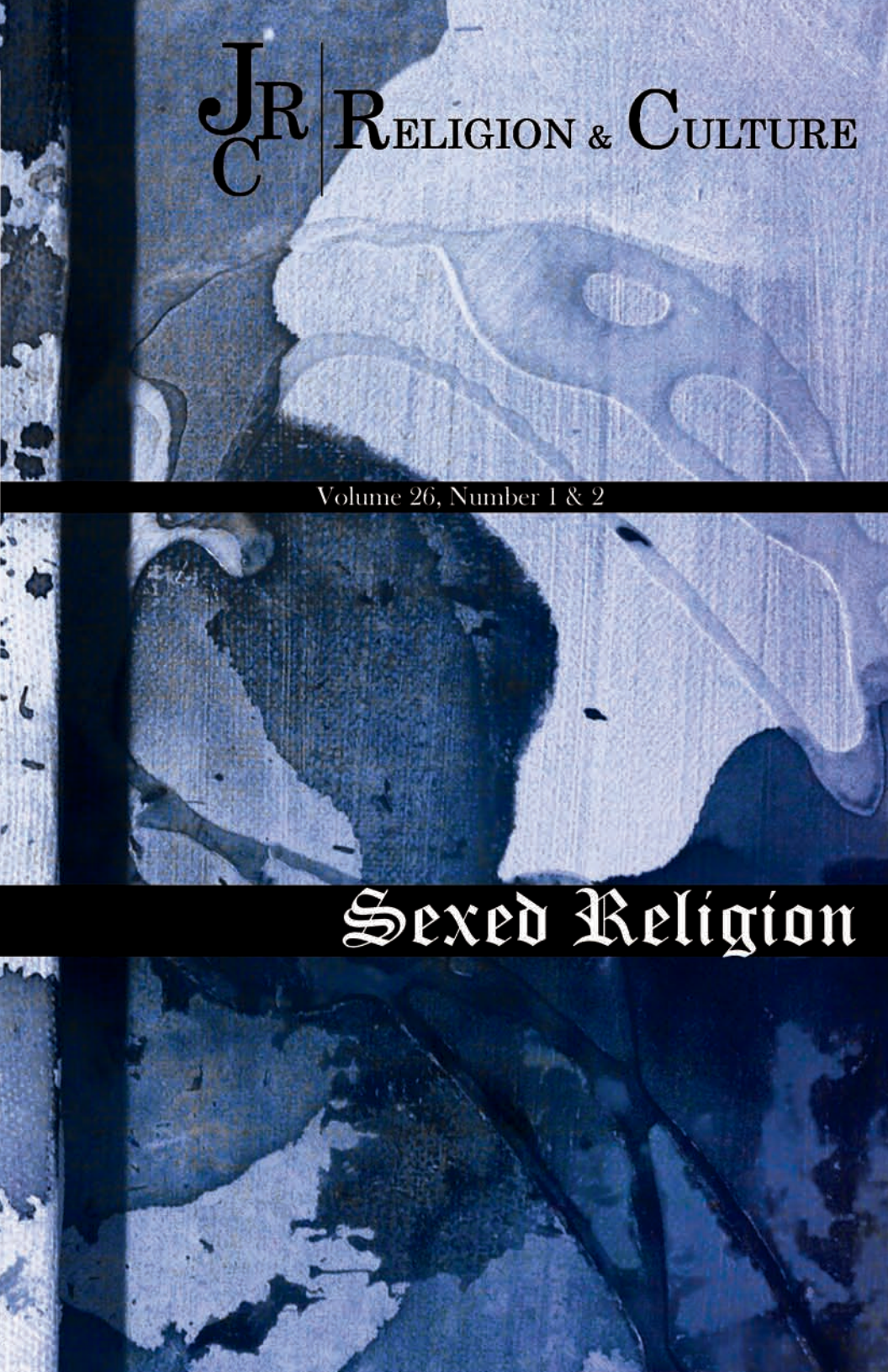
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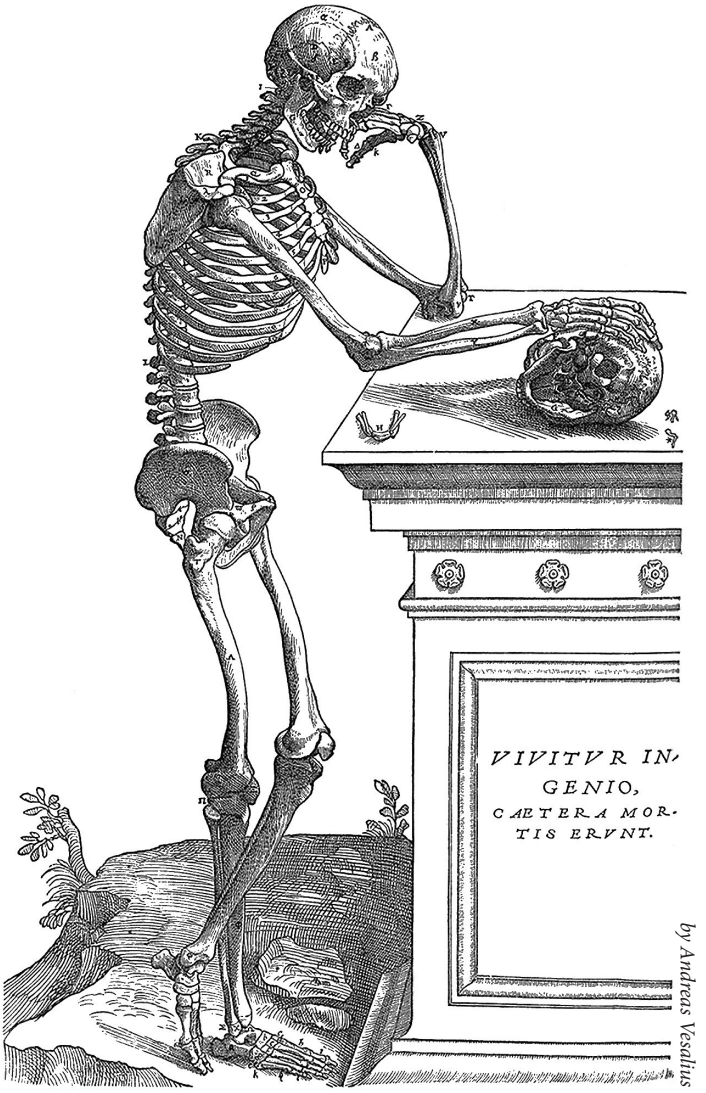

by Andreas Vesalius

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Using a Thorn to Dig Out a Thorn:
A Buddhist Laywoman's Response to Gender Ideology in Late Imperial China

Christopher Byrne

Abstract

This paper examines how the Buddhist laywoman and poet Tao Shan 陶善 (1756-1780) utilized poetic discourse in order to articulate an indirect critique of gender discrimination prevalent within both the Buddhist tradition and the dominant Neo-Confucian ideology of her time. In many of her poems, Tao Shan embraces her seclusion as a woman within the inner domestic realm. As a writer, her words appear to be confined to the private sphere, and as a devoted Buddhist practitioner, she directly affirms the presumed restrictions on women's religious potential that are particularly transparent within her Pure Land Buddhist practice. Yet, in a paradoxical fashion typical of Chinese Buddhist thought, Tao Shan subverts and overturns the conventional meaning of the limitations imposed on women's activities—not by outright rejecting them—but by reinterpreting those limitations according to the esteemed value placed upon silence, reclusion, and humility within the Chinese religious tradition, thereby legitimizing the value of her literary work and her full potential for religious realization.

Keywords: Poet Tao Shan; Neo-Confucianism; Pure Land Buddhism; Gender Ideology in Late Imperial China.

As women increasingly wrote, read, and published in the rapidly expanding literary culture of the Ming and Qing dynasties, women authors had to confront Confucian gender norms in which women were ascribed a place in the inner domestic realm according to a doctrine of separate spheres. Within the inner realm, women were expected to complete their domestic duties and serve and follow men, according to the notion of "thrice following" (sancong三從), in which women were seen as dependent on their fathers, husbands, and sons. Access to education was limited for women compared to elite men who had to prepare for imperial examinations in order to enter into public office. Thus, the literary arts were traditionally considered to be extraneous to the domestic and

secluded lives of women. Furthermore, writing and publishing challenged the gender lines, as women's voices were not supposed to go beyond the bounds of the inner realm and enter into public engagement.[1]

This paper explores how Tao Shan 陶善 (1756-1780), a poet and Buddhist laywoman, utilized the medium of poetry to alter the meaning of women's confinement and to affirm the value of women's education, writing, and religious ability. My purpose is to respond to issues of gender raised within Beata Grant's thorough and detailed recreation of Tao Shan's spiritual biography, where Grant brings forth the laywoman's voice through translation and situates her poetic expressions within their socio-historical context.[2] As in the case of Tao Shan, Beata Grant is nearly singularly responsible for uncovering the literary voice of Chinese Buddhist nuns and laywomen and advancing our knowledge of women's own perspectives of religious life and practices during the Late Imperial period.[3] My intention here is to look specifically at how women could utilize Buddhist philosophy and poetic discourse as strategies of legitimization and critique in response to the dominant gender ideology. Drawing on Grant's research, my approach narrows the thematic focus to analyze the implications of Tao Shan's poetry and its religious themes on gender in an attempt to reconcile a tension that Grant illuminates and articulates in her article. On the one hand, Tao Shan displays great confidence and authority in her efforts to challenge and transcend gender norms. On the other hand, many of her poems explicitly accept those same fundamental gender discriminations.[4] I will argue that Tao Shan took hold of the cultural assumptions of women's inferiority and exclusion, and reinterpreted their significance in order to attest to women's agency in public and religious affairs. Read from this perspective, her endorsements of the dominant gender ideology can be understood as embodying similar forms of criticism and confidence that she expresses elsewhere.

Tao Shan was raised in a family devoted to Buddhism, and is said to have been drawn to Buddhist practice from a young age.[5] She spent eight years between her engagement and marriage focused on the study of Buddhist texts before finally marrying into a family in which her husband's uncle was a famous Buddhist layman, Peng Shaosheng (1740-1796). According to her husband's biography of her, she copied out a number of *sūtras* by hand during her adolescence, including the *Diamond Sūtra* and *Amitābha Sūtra*,[6] which was a common devotional practice during the period.[7] She studied her uncle Peng Shaosheng's writings, dedicated herself to the

Pure Land Buddhist practice of reciting the Buddha Amitābha's name, and maintained a vegetarian diet, among other religious practices. As an active supporter of women's religious cultivation, Peng Shaosheng taught Buddhism to the women of his own family (including Tao Shan) and published *The Biographies of Pious Women* (Shannüren zhuan 善女人傳), a collection of biographies of laywomen who embodied both Confucian ideals of womanly virtue and Buddhist piety.[8] Peng himself selected and published over ninety of Tao Shan's poems after her death at the young age of twenty-four, one year after she gave birth to a son. After her death, Peng claims that Tao Shan was reborn as a man in the Pure Land, upholding the traditional view that one cannot be reborn in the Pure Land in the form of a woman, while also affirming the depth of her Buddhist practice. The popular reception of her work is made apparent by the fact that Tao Shan's poems were eventually published in the Pure Land Buddhist *Supplement to the Tripitaka* (Xuzang jing 續藏經) in the early twentieth century.[9] The Buddhist themes in Tao Shan's poetry correspond to those typical in the Ming and Qing Dynasty and those of Peng Shaosheng himself, emphasizing a lay Pure Land Buddhist practice combined with elements of Chan (J. Zen) Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism.[10] A synthesis of Pure Land and Chan Buddhism had been advocated since the Song and popularized during the Ming, and the ideas and images of both traditions are prevalent in Tao Shan's work.[11]

As Tao Shan, like many other women writers, drew on Buddhist doctrine to interpret women's place in society, it might appear that Buddhism, in contrast to Confucianism, would be an alternative to the dominant gender norms, and thus, the practice of Buddhism along with writing poetry as a woman might mutually support each other in the transcendence of Confucian values. However, on the surface, Buddhism appears to compound the problem of women's writing and agency.

First, rather than questioning the limits and validity of writing for women as in Confucian discourse, the Buddhist philosophy of emptiness and non-duality gave rise to critical perspectives on the adequacy of writing and language in general. This stance of linguistic skepticism is particularly accentuated in Chan Buddhism, which rhetorically distances itself from literary study and instead privileges an insight within silent meditation that is "not dependent on words and letters" (buli wenzi 不立文字). Similar to views within classical Daoism, from the perspective of non-duality, the dualistic nature of language qualifies it as delusive, obscuring the

mutually dependent nature of things and falsely creating the appearance of permanence and substantial individuation.[12] This critique of language and the value placed on silence is best embodied within the image of the legendary lay figure, Vimalakīrti, a popular Buddhist icon in China.[13] As hero of the *sūtra* that bears his name, Vimalakīrti's final discourse on the *sūtra*'s teaching of non-duality is expounded through his "thunderous silence" in contrast to the verbal explanations of numerous enlightened bodhisattvas before him.[14] Although linguistic skepticism may have never significantly inhibited the composition and study of literature—and is itself conveyed in language—lay and monastic Buddhists alike did express their ambivalence toward literary activities, as most famously deliberated within the work of the famous Tang dynasty poet Bai Juyi (772-846).[15] Tao Shan was keenly aware of the Buddhist warnings against attachment to language and strongly indicates her commitment to the ideal of silence.

Second, beyond the Confucian unwillingness to allow women to participate in the public sphere, the Buddhist tradition has often placed theoretical—if not practical—restrictions on women from realizing the most valued religious attainments. Most significantly, the doctrine of the "five hindrances" (*wuzhang* 五障) indicates that women are incapable of realizing various grades of religious potential, including becoming enlightened as a Buddha. Despite Buddhist theories, images of women, and popular stories that imply a radical equality between the sexes and the ability of all sentient beings to attain enlightenment, gender discrimination persists through much of the history of Buddhism and its writings.[16] In the context of Tao Shan's commitment to Pure Land Buddhist practice, it is not possible to be reborn in the Pure Land in the body of a woman.[17]

How then does Tao Shan respond to these Confucian and Buddhist gender discriminations? Although Tao Shan does not explicitly reject the gender discriminations against women, neither does she accept their notions of inferiority. Instead, as in the Buddhist image of "using a thorn to dig out a thorn," she admits the notions of women's inferiority and separateness on the surface;[18] yet, by situating them within the broader context of Chinese cultural ideals and traditions, Tao Shan overturns the meaning of their underlying assumptions in order to legitimate the value of women's education, writing, and religious practice, contrary to the expected and traditional conclusions that denied women's full participation. In the process, the substantiality of these gender discriminations is rendered meaningless.

I. Writing Silence

In Confucian thought, writing was primarily legitimated as a medium to conduct government affairs and reform society rather than publishing for individual fame and profit. Education for elite women was generally supported by individuals of both genders, and could be rationalized within the Confucian system by arguing for their role in the education of their sons and perhaps as a suitable companion for their husbands. Otherwise, women were expected to attend to domestic duties, and women writers in the Ming-Qing frequently made use of set rhetorical phrases in order to place their activities within the acceptable limits of a Confucian household, indicating that they study and write poetry only "after cooking" or "after embroidery."[19]

While literacy would be a necessary skill for the education of sons, women's words were not supposed to go beyond the interior of the domestic domain. Thus, the dissemination of their poetry was often limited to exchanges between women, within women's communities, and between kin. Nevertheless, despite this tension with Confucian norms, women's poetry increasingly began to be published through the Ming and Qing. Many women adopted rhetorical strategies to indicate the authors' indifference to worldly renown. The familiar title of women's poetry collections, Poems Saved from Burning, alludes to the idea that the authors disregarded their writings, tossing them in the fire, only to have the remnants picked out by someone else—usually a male family member—and published.[20]

In this section, I briefly discuss a poem of Tao Shan's that demonstrates her understanding of language in the context of Buddhism, and suggests how the theme of silence may inform her perspective of gender. Tao Shan, like many Buddhists, greatly valued silence and, in fact, repeatedly emphasized the profundity of silence in her poetry on both Buddhism and reclusion. Yet, like other Buddhist and reclusive poets and writers, silence does not prevent her engagement with language but rather informs its usage and significance, as seen in the following poem. Here, Tao Shan skillfully plays with the ideas of language and silence in a poem from a series of ten quatrains entitled "Composed in Response to My Uncle, Master of Two Woods, 'Spring Day Seclusion' Poems" 和叔翁二林主人春日閉關作, written in reply to her uncle Peng Shaosheng, who went by the style name, Master of Two Woods (Erlin Zhuren 二林主人):

From the beginning—neither reality nor illusion. 原來無實亦無虛
To discuss the Dao or chatter about Chan is unnecessary. 論道談禪事也餘
A single phrase—Amituofo—empties one's nature. 一句彌陀空自性
Who is this I? Who is that other?[21] 孰為是我孰為渠

This poem ironically uses language to dismiss the value and efficacy of language, and to express the fundamental ineffability of reality that does not conform to the dualistic terms we typically ascribe to it (such as the paired opposites of reality and illusion). In this regard, Tao Shan stresses the futility and inadequacy of language in the pursuit of religious knowledge and attainment. Her remarks point toward the Chan Buddhist emphasis on direct experience through the practice of silent meditation rather than intellectual study, as well as the Chan and Daoist standpoint that truth is ultimately beyond words.

However, as typical within quatrains, the third line functions as a turning line, which restores the potential of language through the practice of *nianfo* 念佛, the chanting of the name of Amitābha (*Amituofo* 阿彌陀佛) Buddha, the Buddha of the Pure Land, which is the central practice of Pure Land Buddhism.[22] This is not a discursive use of language but a devotional, meditative, and performative one which is effective in "emptying one's nature," or, in other words: realizing the Buddhist idea of no self, the emptiness of oneself as a permanent and independent entity within the world. In this realization, the intuition of the non-duality of self and other is of foremost importance, as expressed in the final rhetorical question: "Who is this I? Who is that other?" In the view that self and other are not fundamentally different, it is also impossible for language to adequately define them; thus, once again, Tao Shan uses a linguistic phrase that effectively expresses the inadequacy of the discriminating aspect of language.

This poem raises a number of points that will be developed in the proceeding discussion. First, the role of language is adequate as long as it does not reify its own dualistic discriminations—such as reality and illusion, self and other, and even speech and silence. This "non-attached" view of language also has a vital implication in terms of gender. By rejecting the substantiality of language and its discriminations, the fundamental differences between men and women, as constructed through language, are brought into question. Second, language is also valued when it functions to support religious practice (as in the chanting of Amitābha's name). Language as a

means of religious or moral teaching is important in the case of the recluse who withdraws from public activity and speech in order to pursue moral cultivation, but nevertheless still communicates through poetry. Just as she utilizes the assumption of linguistic inadequacy in the poem above to create positive religious and poetic meanings in language, Tao Shan transforms the meaning of women's exclusion from the public sphere in the context of reclusion, as discussed below.

II. Reclusion: The Boudoir as Hermitage

A great number of Tao Shan's extant poems are written in the mode of reclusion. Within these poems she re-envisions both the women's inner quarters as a reclusive space of moral cultivation, and the confinement of women's speech as a contemplative religious silence, incorporating both the imagery and the ideal of the recluse into the domestic realm.[23] Tao Shan does not explicitly associate the proscription against women's speech and writing in the public sphere with the silence associated with Buddhists or reclusion. However, by writing from the standpoint of reclusion, her transgression of silence is no longer a transgression of gender but is equated with an esteemed mode of poetic activity among male poets writing within the same reclusive tradition.

Although on the surface her poems may seem to be an innocent play on the reclusive genre or a mere repetition of well-known reclusive themes, these poems reveal a greater depth when interpreted in relation to women's literary and religious ability: a theme that runs through Tao Shan's poetic work. These poems take on even greater significance when considering that reclusion is one of the highest ideals in Chinese thought, and one supported within the three major religions (Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism). By integrating herself (and other gentry women by association) into the reclusive ideal, Tao Shan can inhabit a moral position on par with that of the male recluse, including some of the most respected and well-known poets of classical Chinese literature, such as Tao Qian (372-427) and Wang Wei (701-761).

As it is traditionally defined, the Chinese ideal of reclusion is inapplicable to women. Despite its common associations with a life in communion with nature or living simply and solitarily in the mountains, reclusion was originally defined as withdrawal from public office: a significant act in relation to the value placed on serving the government and society in the Confucian tradition, but nevertheless first articulated and promoted within

the *Analects* of Confucius.[24] Excluded from the government, withdrawal from public office did not have a place in the lives of women in late imperial China. As Grace Fong clarifies, "Ideologically, they were to be *secluded*, and not permitted *reclusion*."[25] Reclusion, however, was also associated with self-cultivation and the preservation of moral integrity, and the image of the recluse grew more intricate over time as it became a poetic motif.

In many of Tao Shan's poems on reclusion, there are no explicit gender markers to indicate that she is responding to gender issues or locating herself as a woman within the reclusive tradition. Nevertheless, many of her non-gendered poems have significant implications concerning the relevance of the eremitic ideal for women. In the following, for example, Tao Shan writes as a recluse, while simultaneously criticizing the literary engagement of recluses in a manner that has bearing on the limits placed on women's speech:

Living in Seclusion in Early Spring: Narrated at Random	早春閒居偶述
Last year, my inspiration to chant verses dwindled;	去年吟興懶
I did not even have ten poems.	未有十首詩
This year it's the same – why can't I	今年復何事
even write a single verse?	更不題一詞
The reason is—these days my mind	所因近日心
does not find anything special about writing.	不以文為奇
No, it's not that I think writing's not special,	非以文不奇
But I fear being ridiculed by the wise.	恐為智者嗤
One who is wise remains still and silent;	智者靜而默
At ease, the mind comes to know itself.[26]	悠 然心自知

The title of the poem indicates that this is a spontaneous creation inspired by the change in seasons. It is written in a direct and almost painfully dry style with no real perceptual imagery to speak of, giving the poem an oral and artless quality as is often associated with the reclusive mode. Tao Shan develops the irony of her unmotivated and intention-less reasons for composing the poem throughout the verse, not only in relation to her flagging inspiration but also in relation to silence. As she begins to explain why she is unable to write poems, she first denies any interest in writing, giving the impression that she has transcended the desire to craft eloquent verse or gain renown as a poet. However, in the fourth couplet the meaning of the poem suddenly turns around. She was not telling the truth; she was acting in the role of the recluse who has no interest in words, but actually

she is merely afraid to write because she does not want to be ridiculed by the wise who remain still and silent. As she asserts, it is through silence and stillness that self-knowledge and wisdom are effortlessly attained.

Although the language is not gendered, the poem gains significance through its female authorship. If we keep the irony of the poem in mind, her "fear at being ridiculed" could be extended as a critique of the poetic engagement of all self-proclaimed recluses.[27] Her transgression of the silence of the inner quarters is thus equated with the moral authority and esteemed words of the male-dominated tradition of recluse poets who spoke from the standpoint of withdrawal.

Other poems specifically identify the persona of the poem as a woman and illustrate the ability of women to embody the reclusive ideal:

Winter Day: An Impromptu Verse	冬日即事
As winter arrives, I put aside the embroidery,	入冬罷刺繡
leisurely sit by the stove and chant verses.	閒坐擁鑪吟
Pine seeds fall on the cold ink-stone;	松子落寒硯
Plum blossoms face the ancient zither.	梅花對古琴
Worldly affairs dissipate like traces of dust;	塵埃消世事
Ice and snow pure like my heart.	冰雪淡予心
I ask those who escape through Chan,	借問逃禪者
true Chan—where is it found?[28]	真禪何處尋

Unlike the lackadaisical style of the previous poem, this self-proclaimed "impromptu" verse is a carefully and wittily crafted regulated verse (*lüshi*) that elicits the author's harmony with nature and conjures a sense of solitude in the cold winter. This is not the solitude of a wife pining for her husband that comprises a common motif in Chinese verse, but the solitude of one who withdraws from the world for religious pursuit. The identification of the subject of the poem as a woman is clarified in the first line by the mention of her embroidery. Her purposeful act of "putting aside" her embroidery—a symbol of "women's work"—is a more assertive move than the one made by many women writers who claim only to write poetry and attend to other matters once their domestic duties have been completed. Nevertheless, the author identifies herself both with domestic work and the traditionally male arts of literary study and music. Although her ink-stone and zither are curiously left unused, this primarily indicates her diminishing desires

for activity in reclusion, and they may indeed be put into action when the mood spontaneously arises, as in the composition of this very poem.

Her "leisurely sitting" (*xian zuo* 閒坐) signals the carefree disposition of the recluse and alludes to the still and silent sitting of Chan Buddhist meditation, evoked in the final couplet, where she rhetorically asks: "I ask those who escape through Chan / true Chan—where is it found?" Two interrelated points are implied here. First, one of the reasons Chan Buddhism is said to be "beyond words" is because it is not an objective thing or experience which one can describe or grasp, either physically or mentally, and thus, it cannot properly be anyone's exclusive possession. Second, this indescribable and non-objective Chan does not exist outside of ordinary experience and the ordinary mind. Thus, the poet is affirming that the stillness and silence of Chan can be realized within her everyday life as a woman—and even within her artistic activities—as she withdraws from worldly desires and calms the mind. As she attests to in the poem, her mind is pure and non-discriminating like the white snow that covers all in a single color and is characterized by the elusive term *dan* 淡, connoting blandness and impartiality.[29]

Besides testifying to her own reclusive attainments, Tao Shan re-imagines the inner quarters as a reclusive retreat—a clever alternative to the mountain or rustic setting typical for the genre.

An Impromptu Verse on the Autumn Boudoir (Three Verses) 秋閨即景三首

1.	The blinds stir with a slight breeze;	簾幕動微風
	A fresh coolness enters into my seat.	新涼入座中
	On the stair—a fine autumn color—	一階秋色好
	The bright moon in the parasol tree.	明月在梧桐
2.	The heat subsides deep within the spotless boudoir;	暑退深閨淨
	Coolness arises from the round fan of autumn.	涼生團扇秋
	With a pure heart, there are no affairs at all;	心清了無事
	There's no need to talk about useless sorrows.	不用說閒愁
3.	Through the long day, the blinds droop to the ground;	晝永簾垂地
	As the incense dies out, the sun's shadows turn.	香消日影回
	On the stairs, the parasol's seeds have fallen.	當階桐子落
	I know it was the birds who brought them.[30]	知是鳥銜來

These three quatrains portray a scene of calm purity within the secluded inner sphere of the women's quarters, undefiled by worldly affairs. The first quatrain evokes the stillness and seclusion of the inner quarters by reference to the slight movements of the blinds that keep the women's quarters withdrawn from the outside world. Although there is no explicit Buddhist language in this series, the image of her "seat" (*zuo* 座) alludes once again to the practice of sitting meditation, and her attention to the light, cool breeze is reflective of the perceptual sensitivity associated with still sitting. When read with Buddhist connotations, the moonlight reflected within the inner quarters symbolizes the awakened mind—impartial to gender—that indiscriminately illuminates the entire phenomenal world before it.

Tao Shan's portrayal of the clear (*qing* 清) and clean (*jing* 淨) purity within the boudoir in the second quatrain resonates with descriptions of women's moral rectitude and chastity according to Confucian standards, as well as perfection of the Buddhist Pure Land that can be realized in this world by preserving a tranquil mind. As her detachment from worldly desires naturally results from the purity of her mind, she presents the boudoir itself as an idyllic space, necessarily removed from public affairs, where its silence serves to transcend delusive passions.

The final quatrain is imagistic and subtle, as Tao Shan crafts a delicate scene suggestive of Buddhist meditation and devotional practice through her allusion to the vanishing incense. Again she is secluded within the blinds all day long, and her perception of the movements of the sun's shadows creates an image of quiet attentiveness. In her motionless position within the inner quarters, she notices the slowly changing positions of the soft shadows that come through the blinds: a perfect image of a long day of stillness. In the closing couplet (as in the first quatrain), Tao Shan is again gazing, or stepping, outside. Making a seemingly mundane comment that the birds have dropped the seeds of the parasol tree on the stairs, Tao Shan reveals her profound correspondence with nature while she remains indoors as the birds fearlessly respond to the purity of her heart.

Although traditionally defined as withdrawal from public service, reclusion nevertheless embodies a particular mode of social engagement: one supposedly unspoiled by an intention for public office and worldly gain. The recluse's withdrawal itself may justify the poetic act, as it is through poetry that the recluse embodies her insights and attainments cultivated in silence and promotes the reclusive ideal. Tao Shan had little choice in withdrawing

into the inner quarters, where life must not have been as idyllic as she depicts it. Yet, by identifying women's life within the inner quarters with the realization of the reclusive ideal; Tao Shan implies her moral authority to write, speak, and engage with the public world, just as the revered male recluse. In this manner, she poetically re-imagines her confinement within the inner quarters to imbue her world with the significance of the physical and mental withdrawal esteemed within Chinese poetic and religious traditions.

III. Women and Religious Agency

As we have seen in the case of reclusion, Tao Shan was confident about women's abilities to cultivate the moral-religious character of the recluse and attain a state of Chan awareness within the everyday life of the women's quarters. Here I will argue that she also negates any substantial difference between the Buddhist practice of men and women, and affirms the potential of women to realize Buddhist truth despite the rhetoric of women's inability to attain enlightenment and be reborn in the Pure Land.

Tao Shan's response to the traditional Buddhist denial of the possibility of women's religious attainment is sophisticated and indirect, and must be understood in the context of her understanding of the Mahāyāna Buddhist foundations of Pure Land and Chan practice and doctrine. Her perspective of the Pure Land is expressed in the following poem—another within the series written to her uncle entitled, "Composed in Response to My Uncle, Master of Two Woods' 'Spring Day Seclusion' Poems":

How different are these rows of trees from the Seven-Jewel Woods?	行樹何殊七寶林
From the branch tips, you can also listen to divine birds,	枝頭也得聽靈禽
Naturally expounding the Dharma within the east wind,	自然說法東風裏
singing one hundred thousand subtle sounds.[31]	演出百千微妙音

In textual descriptions of the Pure Land, birds and jeweled trees preach the Dharma continuously to those reborn there.[32] By questioning the difference between trees in the ordinary world with those of the "Seven-Jewel Woods" found in the Pure Land, Tao Shan alludes to the popular notion that this land is already the Pure Land. The identification of the Pure Land with the ordinary world had gained currency during Tao Shan's time. For instance, Master Shengyan (1686-1734), who was recognized as the ninth Patriarch of Pure Land Buddhism and died just over twenty years before Tao Shan

was born, claimed: "The present moment is none other than the Western Paradise."[33] Peng Shaosheng also expressed his accord with this line of thought, and argued that the Pure Land depended on one's state of mind. Quoting the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra*, he wrote: "The Mind itself encompasses all the Buddha realms. Thus it is said, 'If the Mind is pure, the Buddha realms will be pure.'"[34] In this logic, rebirth in the Pure Land does not refer to a place one goes after death, or to a world separate from this one, but rather the realization of the original purity one's mind.

This identification of the ordinary world with the Pure Land further accords with the Mahāyāna Buddhism notion that all sentient beings are endowed with Buddha-nature, or the inherent potentiality for enlightenment. This is espoused in the *Śūramgama Sūtra*, for instance: the most popular sūtra among women during the Qing.[35] According to Mahāyāna Buddhist doctrine, all living things and all phenomena are fundamentally empty of any permanent or substantial self-essence; thus, everything is inherently a manifestation of the Dharma, i.e. the Buddhist teaching of emptiness. In this way, the singing birds in Tao Shan's poem "naturally" and inevitably expound the Dharma without intention and without effort. In textual accounts and iconographic representations, the Pure Land is in part "pure" in its absence of female forms.[36] However, from the non-dual standpoint where the ordinary world is not fundamentally different from the Pure Land, the exclusion of women has no place. From the perspective of Buddha-nature, if even the singing of ordinary birds teaches the Dharma, how could women and their speech be excluded?

In addition to her this-worldly, non-dual interpretation of the Pure Land, Tao Shan further describes her own religious awakening in the same series of poems:

To break through the fundamental barrier is to touch the place of truth;	勘破重關觸處眞
From now on I will not enter the path of delusion.	從今不入舊迷津
Amidst the endless cycle, Six Syllables without beginning or end;[37]	輪廻六字無終始
Flowing rivers—drifting clouds—are eternally spring.[38]	流水行雲總是春

Tao Shan's claim to a profound religious realization is testified by Peng Shaosheng in the preface he composed to her poems where he praises this series and writes: "In those ten poems . . . she penetrated and mastered the

Dharma source . . . This was not something those of limited knowledge and shallow roots would be able to fathom."[39]

With the previous discussion in mind, we can finally examine Tao Shan's own rhetorical denial of her ability to attain enlightenment as a woman, despite her own testaments to the contrary. When she addresses the Buddhist notion that women are not capable of religious attainment, rather than refuting the idea, she accepts it as truth:

I am ashamed that in my previous life I did not cultivate virtue;	慚愧前生德未修
This resultant body and its five hindrances[40] are due to karma.	報身五障有因由
However, I am fortunate to have obtained a human body in this life;	然而幸得人身在
How could I dislike being a woman?[41]	豈可還嫌是女流

This poem is the first in a series of thirty quatrains, entitled "Chants of Karmic Shame" (因命曰慚愧吟). Throughout these poems, she declares her shame for various shortcomings, including her exemption from labor as a gentry woman and her imperfection at fulfilling the requirements of filial piety. Here, she states that she is ashamed for being born a woman, which in traditional Buddhist thought is the result of negative karma from the past. Conventionally understood, birth as a woman would be due to some previous moral fault and would be an undesirable result because of the assumed impediments to religious practice. As Tao Shan says, as a woman, she is prohibited from religious attainment by the "five hindrances," the exclusion of women from five different grades of achievement, including becoming a Buddha.

However, the context in which she makes these rhetorical declarations of her shame must be taken into account to understand their significance, as elucidated in her preface to the series, translated by Beata Grant:

> Now it happens that since I am a woman, and lacking the wherewithal to rescue body and mind, I am still floating in [the samsaric realm of] birth and death… A Buddhist sūtra says that those who know no remorse are indistinguishable from the birds and the beasts; Daoist texts say that one should always keep this [sense

> of] shame in one's mind; Confucius says that "he who in his conduct of himself maintains a sense of shame [is worthy to be called an officer]." This is just the same as [what I am referring to as] shame. All these sages of the Three Teachings, in saving themselves and others, based themselves on nothing more than this [sense of] shame. Common people do away with it, superior people retain it: this is the only difference between them. Writing has its limits, but shame is endless… [42]

In this preface, she again acknowledges her inability as a woman to rescue herself from the cycle of birth and death. However, Tao Shan clarifies that shame is not only in accord with the three major Chinese religious traditions, but is an essential prerequisite for salvation of oneself and others. According to her explanation then, her expressions of shame would be the means to her own salvation and, moreover, qualify her as being a "superior" person. Although Tao Shan constructs the preface in order to include the three major religious traditions, her words take on additional meaning in the context of Pure Land Buddhism. Although she writes that as a *woman* she is unable to rescue herself, her words allude to the Pure Land belief in which *all beings*—men included—are equally powerless to attain salvation through their own efforts and must rely on the aid of Amitābha Buddha.[43] In Pure Land doctrine then, men must necessarily face similar obstacles and rely on the same means of salvation, which would constitute chanting the name of Amitābha with a sincere heart.[44]

If we return to the first poem in her series and reconsider its meaning in light of the preface, her potential to attain religious salvation as a woman is re-opened through her expression of shame, including—paradoxically—her shame for the inability to save herself. But this is an interpretation and rhetorical strategy that entails serious risk and potentially leads to a highly undesirable conclusion. It could be interpreted to mean that only by expressing shame for being born a woman (thus reifying conventional gender discriminations) will she then be able to attain salvation. My argument, however, is that Tao Shan intends a very different conclusion. Her point is: if no particular aptitude is necessary for religious attainment other than an attitude of humility expressed by such ordinary human emotions as shame and gratitude, then there is no reason why women cannot equally and fully participate in the ideals central to Chinese religiosity. As such, the

idea that women are inherently unqualified has no logical basis. Even more significantly, the arrogant assumption of superior position or privileged access to enlightenment could be a far more serious obstacle to religious realization than any perceived inability and, in the context of Pure Land Buddhism, could prevent one from receiving the salvific grace of Amitābha Buddha. In her poem, Tao Shan draws attention to the traditional Buddhist view that it is extremely fortunate to be born as a human, because only as a human can one practice Buddhism. On this basis, she questions the validity of gender distinctions as she rhetorically asks: "How could I dislike being a woman?" In other words, how could being a woman truly be an obstacle?

As we have seen, Tao Shan expresses great confidence about her own religious insights and attainments in many of her poems. Even in the preface to her series on shame, she speaks with authority on the fundamentals of religion and the characteristics of a superior person. The entire series appears to be constructed to address the question of the religious capabilities of women, as the concluding verse also takes up the theme. Here she again confesses her inability to attain enlightenment, but does so in contrast to women who have indeed realized the highest Buddhist ideals:

Mahāprajāpāti Gotami made a vast and limitless vow　憍曇彌願廣無邊
To save every last woman in this world.[45]　度盡閻浮婦女緣
I am ashamed that the karmic obstacles from lives past　慚愧夙生多障業
Are such that I lack Lingzhao's potential for enlightenment.[46]輸他靈照悟機先

Mahāprajāpāti Gotami is the Buddha's aunt and step-mother, who is known for persuading the Buddha to accept women as disciples. Here, Tao Shan depicts her as fulfilling the ultimate ideal in Mahāyāna Buddhism: that of the bodhisattva, who forsakes her own enlightenment in order to save all sentient beings. Although not mentioned here, any Chinese reader would be aware that the principal archetype of the bodhisattva ideal in China was Guanyin, the Bodhisattva of Compassion, who had assumed female form in popular iconography centuries before Tao Shan's own time.[47] In this poem, however, Tao Shan does not refer to the perfections of mythical figures, but to those of ordinary women like herself, including the laywoman Lingzhao, the legendary daughter of the famous Chan figure, Layman Pang (740?-808). Layman Pang, his wife, and daughter Lingzhao all lived together according to Chan principles, and are equally portrayed as Chan masters

in the anecdotes about them.[48] In this final verse, Tao Shan thus reaffirms the potential of enlightenment for women that she rhetorically denies for herself.

IV. Conclusion

In her pioneering study of the rise of women's literary culture in seventeenth century China, Dorothy Ko put forth the thesis that while women writers renegotiated the bounds of Confucian gender norms, ultimately they reinforced the doctrine of separate spheres for men and women: "On an individual level, some women gained parity with men in the world of learning and literature; the opposite is true on a systematic level, where the promotion of the woman writer served only to reinforce the prevalent premise of gender distinctions."[49] In many ways this is true of Tao Shan, as she does not truly dispute women's position within the inner domestic realm. In particular, her presentation of women of the inner quarters fulfilling the ideals of the recluse, along with the implied value of their words arising out of silence and seclusion, depends on women's confinement to the inner, private sphere. At the same time, however, Tao Shan's utilization of the cultural assumption of separateness is not a passive acceptance of the seclusion of women and the limitation of their speech. She turns the tables on the conventional significance applied to women's position in society in order to validate women's literary and religious agency, challenging the limits imposed on women like herself and creating meaning within the conditions that she lived.

In addition, although it would indeed have been difficult, especially for a young woman, to directly challenge the dominant gender ideology, the implicit critiques she makes while supporting conventional gender roles and discriminations on the surface are more than just covert strategies to avoid censure for criticizing gender norms. By inverting the significance of traditional gender discriminations, she defeats them through their own logic, using their assumptions to reach conclusions contrary to their conventional meaning and proving that their rationale is groundless. This is best displayed when she addresses the Buddhist view that women are incapable of religious attainment. Her willingness to rhetorically support this position suggests that it must have continued to exert a powerful force over Buddhist thinking in her time and thus, compelled her, not only to exhibit her own religious insight and call attention to exemplary Buddhist women, but to demonstrate that according to the fundamentals

of religious practice, even the notion of incapability cannot logically hinder religious realization. Tao Shan's poems exemplify that in the context of religious practice, gender discriminations—like all distinctions according to Mahāyāna Buddhist philosophy—are ultimately insubstantial and delusive.

Notes

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1. See Ko, Teachers of the Inner Chambers, for a discussion of the rise of women's literary culture in seventeenth century China; and Mann, Precious Records, for an analysis of women's literary culture in the eighteenth century.
2. See Grant, "Who is this I?" My translations of Tao Shan's poems were made in consultation with those by Grant in her article, as well as those found within the entry for "Tao Shan" in Wilt Idema and Beata Grant's The Red Brush, 578-588, and for the most part, they do not significantly differ in meaning. I have translated these verses in my own language primarily to facilitate my analysis, and secondly, to offer some alternative possibilities for how their poetic language may be rendered and understood.
3. Along with the sources cited within this paper, Grant's contributions include her monograph, Eminent Nuns.
4. See Grant, "Who is This I?," especially the "Conclusion" (pp. 80-81), where after noting how Tao Shan writes "with considerable authority and confidence," Grant observes: "…Although ultimately she seeks…to transcend traditional assumptions about the social, physical, and spiritual inferiority of women, she has profoundly internalized many of these same assumptions." Although I argue that Tao Shan reinterprets the significance of gender distinctions, I do agree that Tao Shan's strategies assume and reinforce the distinctions between inner and outer spheres.
5. The following description of Tao Shan's life and religious practice is primarily drawn from Grant, "Who is This I?"
6. Idema and Grant, The Red Brush, 586.
7. See Mann, Precious Records, 190.
8. See Shek, "Testimony to the Resilience of Mind," 89, and Grant, Daughters of Emptiness, 13-14.
9. Grant, "Who is This I?," 48.
10. See Shek, "Testimony to the Resilience of Mind."
11. Grant, "Little Vimalakīrti," 286.
12. There are many articles and monographs devoted to the discussion of the role of language in Buddhism and in Daoism. See, for example, Ch'ien, "The Conception of Language and the Use of Paradox in Buddhism and Taoism." Like many other scholars, Ch'ien recognizes that the linguistic skepticism in Buddhism and Daoism does not result in the rejection of language, but rather in a paradoxical engagement within language, in which linguistic skepticism is expressed verbally.
13. For the popularity of Vimalakīrti in China, see Zürcher, The Buddhist Conquest of China, esp. 132.
14. See Thurman, The Holy Teaching of Vimalakīrti.
15. See Watson, "Buddhism in the Poetry of Po Chü-i" and "Buddhist Poet-Priests of the T'ang." See also Grant, "Through the Empty Gate," (esp. pp. 93-96) for how Buddhist nuns both expressed their concerns with language and justified their literary engagements. For an argument on how silence is central to the poetic discourse and practices of Chan Buddhist monks, see my dissertation, "Poetics of Silence: Hongzhi

Zhengjue (1091-1157) and the Practice of Poetry in Song Dynasty Chan Yulu."

16. For discussion of women and gender in Buddhism, see, for example, the edited volume by José Ignacio Cabezon, Buddhism, Sexuality, and Gender.
17. For a brief overview on Pure Land Buddhist practice, cosmology, philosophy, and its developments in China; see Williams, Mahāyāna Buddhism, 251-264. For the exclusion of women from conceptions of the pure land, see pp. 245 and 249.
18. This image traditionally comes from the idea of using passions and lust to root out desires. I am not using the image in the sense of lust and passions here. See Obeyesekere, Portraits of Buddhist Women, 158.
19. For a discussion of these rhetorical strategies, see Mann, Precious Records, 77.
20. See Fong, Herself an Author, 65.
21. Second poem in the series. Tao Shan, Qionglou yingao, 17b. See Grant, "Who is this I?," 74.
22. For the importance of chanting Amitābha name in Chinese Pure Land Buddhism, see Williams, Mahāyāna Buddhism, 259-262.
23. Tao Shan is certainly not the first or only women to establish a relationship between reclusion and women's inner quarters. See Fong, "A Recluse of the Inner Quarters."
24. Vervoorn, Men of the Cliffs and Caves, 8, 30.
25. Fong, "A Recluse of the Inner Quarters," 34.
26. Tao Shan, Qionglou yingao, 10b-11a. See Grant, "Who is this I?," 66-67.
27. For an analysis of how the tension between literary composition and the silence of the recluse has been negotiated within the Chinese poetic tradition, see Varsano, "Looking for the Recluse and Not Finding Him In."
28. Tao Shan, Qionglou yingao, 5b. See Grant, "Who is this I?," 54.
29. See entry for term (#6053) in Mathews, Mathews', 868.
30. Tao Shan, Qionglou yingao, 7b. See Grant, "Who is this I?," 54, 55.
31. Sixth poem in the series. Tao Shan, Qionglou yingao, 18a. See Grant, "Who is this I?," 73.
32. See Williams, Mahāyāna Buddhism, 255.
33. Grant, "Who is this I?," 73.
34. Shek, "Testimony to the Resilience of the Mind," 93.
35. Mann, Precious Records, 187-188.
36. See, for example, the expression: "Yixiang qingjing wuyou nüren" 一向淸淨無有女人 (The land of that Buddha is) everywhere pure; no women are there." Soothill and Lewis, A Dictionary of Chinese Buddhist Terms, 4.
37. "Six Syllables" refers to "the six words or syllables 南無阿彌陀佛Namo Amitābha." See entry for liuzi 六字 in Muller, Digital Dictionary of Buddhism.
38. Tenth poem in the series. Tao Shan, Qionglou yingao, 18b. See Grant, "Who is this I?," 73.
39. Idema and Grant, The Red Brush, 587.
40. "Five hindrances" (wu zhang 五障): "The five special hindrances for women—the hindrances of inability to be born: (1) a god in the Brahma heaven 梵天, (2) a god in the Indra heaven 帝釋天, (3) a Mara king 魔王, (4) a wheel-turning king 轉輪聖王, and (5) a buddha 佛. " Muller, Digital Dictionary of Buddhism.
41. Tao Shan, Qionglou yingao, 11b. See Grant, "Who is this I?," 62.
42. Grant, "Who is this I?" 61. Tao Shan, Qionglou yingao, 11b.
43. See Williams, Mahāyāna Buddhism, 258-259, for a discussion of the importance of faith and the reliance on Other Power in Chinese Pure Land Buddhism and its

significance to the problem of "spiritual pride."
44. For the privileging of nianfo as the principal practice in Chinese Pure Land and its foundation in faith and sincerity, see Williams, Mahāyāna Buddhism, 261-262.
45. Yanfu 閻浮 refers to "Jambudvīpa 閻浮提—the human world." See Muller, Digital Dictionary of Buddhism.
46. This is Beata Grant's translation in "Who is this I?" (p. 70), slightly modified by removing the Sanskrit term Jambudvīpa. Tao Shan, Qionglou yingao, 17a.
47. See Yü, Kuan-yin, esp. p. 6 and pp. 293-352.
48. See Sasaki, et al, The Recorded Sayings of Layman P'ang.
49. Ko, Teachers of the Inner Chambers, 66.

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